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## Food & Wine

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# Torrone: The Mediterranean's Christmas Candy

Of uncertain origin, the first mention of torrone comes in Cremona during the reign of Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II

 *Italian Hours*  
Lucy Gordan



A display of traditional Cremonese torrone. Photo credit: Lucy Gordan



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When and where was *torrone* first created? No one knows for certain. Some connoisseurs say Persia; others Arabia; and still others China. A clue lies in its list of ingredients, which is short and sweet: almonds, honey, sugar and egg white, although other nuts (pistachios, walnuts and hazelnuts), candied fruits and chocolate can be added.



A display of traditional torrone in different flavors. Photo credit: Lucy Gordon

Thus, no matter where its birthplace, *torrone* almost certainly reached Europe from the Middle East, whether it was thanks to the Crusaders or more likely earlier, through Arab traders in Ancient Rome. All versions of its name *turrón* in Spanish, *torró* in Catalan, *torrone* in Brazilian and Brazilian Portuguese besides Italian, *turrone* in Sardinian, *torrão* in European Portuguese, and *turon* in Tagalog, appear to have been derived from Latin *torrere* (to toast). So the modern confection probably originates from a Muslim recipe, prevalent in parts of Islamic Spain and known as *turun*. It's certainly popular at Christmastime in Spain, particularly in Alicante and in Toledo, as well as in countries formerly part of the Spanish Empire, particularly in Latin America, but in the Philippines too. However, a similar confection named *cupedia* or *cuperto* was marketed in ancient Rome and noted by ancient Roman poets.

Today Italian *torrone* is particularly popular all over Sicily—especially *Condorelli's* brightly-wrapped *torroncini*; in Bagnara and Taurianova in Calabria; in Benevento near Naples, best at *Fabbriche Riunite Torrone di Benevento*; in Abruzzo best at *Le Sorelle Nurzia* in L'Aquila and at the *Pasticceria Lullo* in Guardiagrele where its recipe includes candied fruit and cinnamon; as well as in Sardinia, where it's particularly cloyingly sweet and very chewy; and Cremona in Lombardy, birthplace of Stradivarius, so frequently made there in the shape of violins.





A 13th-century fresco of Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, who introduced torrone to Cremona. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons

Every mid-November for the past 25 years, a festival in Cremona celebrates this delectable sweet. This year *La Festa del Torrone* took place from 12-20 November and counted over 400,000 visitors including me, a guest of Cremona Tourism. Next year's dates are 13-21 November.

The first documents mentioning *torrone* in Cremona date to the reign of Holy Roman Emperor, super-cultured, multi-lingual, Frederick II (r. 1220-1250) when Cremona was already one of northern Italy's most powerful cities. Frederick II, whose birthday was December 26 hence likely *torrone's* Christmas connection, visited here 16 times with his entourage of Sicilian cooks well versed in Arab culture. However, their recipe did not include egg white, so it was crunchier. Instead, local lore claims that *torrone's* debut was in 1441 as a tower-shaped dessert created for the marriage on October 25<sup>th</sup> in the Abbey of San Sigismondo, of Francesco Sforza (1401-66), one of 7 illegitimate sons of the *condottiere* Muzio Sforza, and the also illegitimate yet very intellectual Maria Bianca Visconti (1425-1468), a passionate hunter and lover of horses. The court's Sicilian pastry chefs were inspired by the *Torrazzo* or the brick bell tower next door to the Cathedral. Built between 1230-1309, at some 112 m. tall, it's one of the tallest still-integral bell towers of medieval Europe and today the symbol of Cremona. Every year on the *Festa's* first Sunday afternoon, the wedding is reenacted with a procession of musicians, *sbandieratori*, and ladies-in-waiting who accompany Maria to the Cathedral where Francesco awaits her.



l Torrazzo, the symbol of Cremona and inspiration

One of Italy's most appreciated *torroni* is Cremona's native-son Sperlari, founded by Enzo Sperlari in 1836 and official supplier to the Italian Royal Family. A major sponsor for the *Festa*, it still has its flagship atmospheric 19<sup>th</sup>-century store on Via Solferino 25, tel. 011-39-0372-22346), [www.sperlari.it](http://www.sperlari.it), for online orders: [www.shop.sperlari1836.com](http://www.shop.sperlari1836.com).

Cremona's homemade *torroni* can be ordered online from *Enoteca Cremona*, (Via Platina 18, 011-39-0372-451771), [www.enotecacremona.it](http://www.enotecacremona.it) (click on *specialità* for its scrumptious *torta torrone* "Ad Libitum"), e-mail: [enotecacremona@gmail.com](mailto:enotecacremona@gmail.com) or from Pasticceria Fieschi, founded in 1867, Via Lanaoli 24, 011-39-0372-32495, [www.fieschi1867.com](http://www.fieschi1867.com), e-mail: [info@fieschi1867.com](mailto:info@fieschi1867.com) or chocolatier Tosca Cremona (Via Monteverdi 34, San Vito-26011 Castelbuttano ed Uniti (Cremona), 011-39-0374-374-361386)only [www.toscacremona.it](http://www.toscacremona.it), e-mail: [info@toscacremona.it](mailto:info@toscacremona.it).



for the wedding sweet ant the Sforza/Visconti wedding. Photo credit: Lucy Gordan



A Sperlari delivery truck. Photo credit: Lucy Gordan

The Italian varieties of *torrone* differ from the Spanish ones because they use a lower proportion of nuts in the confection. Traditional versions from Cremona range widely in texture (*morbido*, soft and chewy, to *duro*, hard and brittle) and in flavor (at the many white-tented stands in Cremona's many *piazze* I counted several: citrus fruits, *limoncello*, rum, black cherry, coffee, coco, raspberry and chocolate, coconut, blueberry, marron glacé, liquorice, and vanilla, added to the traditional nougat (English for *torrone*) and many contained whole hazelnuts, walnuts and pistachios as well as the traditional almonds. Some were also dipped in chocolate.

*Torrone di Benevento* goes by its historic name *Cupedia*, which signifies the crumbly version made with hazelnuts. The softer version is made only with almonds. The *Torrone di Benevento*, considered to be "The Boot"'s oldest, predates Roman times. Today it's very popular in the territories of Samnium and differs only marginally from the varieties of *Torrone di Cremona*. Thanks to Frederick II?

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*Italian Hours*

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